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ABSTRACT

Cover art has long been used as a marketing device for books, particularly with books aimed at young adults (YAs) aged 12 to 18. An examination of some of the teen thrillers published by novelist Lois Duncan since the 1970s yields several discoveries about changes in cover art that come with various editions. Many covers have been resigned to capitalize on the current teenage taste for blood, gore, and nasty stuff even if the cover implies more terror than actually exists in the story. Current covers also sometimes are devoid of people, so that clothes and hairstyles do not become dated quickly. The conventional wisdom of previous decades was to show adolescents on covers to foster personal identification with the characters. Another trend is to populate cover art with girls or couples regardless of content, in view of the fact that more girls purchase books than boys. Differences are compounded even further in overseas editions. Despite the apparent drawing power of book cover art, publishers seem to have done little or no scientific research on it, preferring to rely on impressions rather than data. They also tend to consult first-level buyers, like booksellers, librarians, and teachers, rather than the teenagers themselves. It is suggested that unknown factors may change too quickly to make research viable, and that adolescents might well be unwilling to open up about their tastes even if they were asked. (BEW)

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Cover Art, Consumerism, And YA Reading Choices

by Cosette Kies

Introduction

Cover art, including both book jackets for hardcover books and covers on paperbacks, have long been used by publishers as a marketing device. In today's affluent society, teenagers have become a major marketing focus for many products, including books.

This paper will consider certain aspects of book cover design. Also, consideration will be given to recent cover designs of specific covers over time to illustrate changes caused by marketing. Some attention will be given to international aspects of one book title.

Cover Art

Books published for young adults (YAs), teenagers aged 12-18, have two primary audiences. Books with hardcovers and dust jackets are aimed at the adults who work with teens, such as teachers and librarians. Paperbacks, however, are produced for the teens themselves. Teenager prefer the paperback format and have become buyers of paperbacks themselves.

In spite of two different audiences for marketing, teenagers are the ultimate consumers. For the most part, YAs are the ones who actually read the books, both in hardcover and paperback formats. With this in mind, publishers have discovered through remarkably unsophisticated "research" that certain guidelines need to be followed in producing books covers. This has resulted in an uncodified set of vague rules, a sort of publishers' conventional wisdom.

One of the most important elements is the need for honesty on the covers. Honesty has been determined to be a rule for YA covers for some time, yet is still not scrupulously followed. If the illustration on the cover of a book implies something else rather than the actual contents of the book, teenagers are disappointed. For example, the most popular genre for teenagers today is horror. This has resulted in many thrillers and mysteries being designed with the current standardized horror cover: dark background, white (or pale) lettering, and something (or someone) to suggest something pretty awful taking place in the book. This can be seen quickly in the recent resign of Lois Duncan's paperbacks. Lois Duncan has been a popular writer of thrillers for adolescents for over twenty years. Like most authors, she is not

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involved actively in decisions regarding cover art.

Duncan's books have been genre bestsellers for the past couple decades. A few years ago, her books were redesigned, obviously to capitalize on the current teenage taste for blood, gore, and nasty stuff. The books are really not horror titles, but have been packaged to look like them. Oddly enough, this doesn't seem to turn the teenage readers off because of implying that there is more gore in the book than actually exists. So it may mean that the first rule of cover art, honesty, may not be that important at all. One possibility is that many readers of the Duncan titles are happy to be seen reading something that looks pretty shocking, but are secretly happier with milder contents.

Figure 1
TWO PAPERBACK COVERS
FOR KILLING MR. GRIFFIN

Figure 1 shows what has occurred with one of her more controversial books, Killing Mr. Griffin. It tells about a small group of teenagers who kidnap a despised high school English teacher with the odd idea that they can scare him into giving them better grades. The plan backfires. Mr. Griffin suffers from a heart attack and dies, leaving the perpetrators with a corpse on their hands.

On the left, the original paperback cover (1979) shows the teenagers wearing "in" clothes and hairstyles for that time. They are staring down with horrified faces at an unseen corpse. One, the psychopathic ringleader, smirks. The newer cover (1991) eliminates the teenagers altogether, showing only the tied ankles of the body. The new version is more dramatic and certainly will not become as dated as quickly as the original. Adolescents sometimes admit that they do not want to read books with pictures of dumb-looking kids on the cover.

During the 1970s and 1980s it was felt that it was important to show adolescents on the covers of paperbacks. Personal identification with the characters in the books was thought to be vital for teenagers. Although some covers now avoid using people at all, there is still considerable use of teenagers on covers. In fact, Caroline Cooney, another popular writer of thrillers for teens, has said that her publisher insisted on putting the figure of a girl on the cover of one book even though the central character of the story was a boy. Another bit of conventional wisdom at work; more teenage girls buy books than teenage boys, hence the cover art should include, or feature, a girl. Another belief is that girls like stories with romance, therefore a boy and girl together on a cover is considered another good marketing ploy.

Another example of paperback cover design can be seen in Duncan's 1974 work, Down a Dark Hall, the story of an small, exclusive, all girls' boarding

school. It is so small and elite that there are only four, carefully selected students. The faculty, also is small. It becomes obvious very quickly that something is terribly wrong in the school. The heroine, Kit, discovers that the girls are being used as hosts for dead geniuses of the past. Kit herself has been "invaded" by the soul of a brilliant musician. Since Duncan's books are not really horror, right prevails in the end. The evil headmistress is defeated and Kit escapes from the terrible school.

Figure 2
Down a Dark Hall

The book was first published in 1974, providing the opportunity for four different paperback covers for the still popular book. Figure 2 provides a cover history of about 20 years.

The original paperback cover (upper right) is simply a miniature version of the original, and still, hardcover dust jacket. It is typical of many gothic covers. Gothic novels were very popular in the 1970's, and the publisher was obviously trying to cash in on that then-bestselling genre. The figure of Kit, naturally dressed in the mandatory gothic white nightgown, looks up in fear. The musical genius who has invaded her body looms over her. He looks a lot like Franz Schubert. The obligatory dark, brooding gothic building of the school is in the background.

A few years later (upper left), another paperback cover appeared. This time, Kit (whose hair is shown as flaming red rather than brunette) is dressed in a school uniform and flees down the hallway of an old Victorian mansion. The cover is no longer in the most ridiculed gothic cover style, but still retains the visual elements identifying this book as a thriller for girls. The illustration actually reinforces the title of the book quite nicely.

The third paperback cover for Down a Dark Hall (lower left) goes back to Kit with dark hair and dressed in a white night robe. This time she stands on a staircase holding a lighted candle. She is staring at the darkness beyond, looking apprehensive.

The current paperback cover (lower right) is another redesign now pitching the book as horror, rather than a thriller, or gothic. Here we see skeleton

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hands playing a piano keyboard, symbolic of the dead genius whose spirit has invaded Kit's body.

Marketing and Consumerism

The changes in the cover art for Down a Dark Hall illustrate clearly the thinking of publishers in trying to appeal to the popular market of the moment. These particular covers also show certain characteristics of cover art thought to entice potential buyers. Another bit of publishers' conventional wisdom is that if a potential purchaser actually picks up a book, there is a good chance that book will be bought.

Publishers appear to have done little or no scientific research regarding cover art. Even though covers are assumed to have a great influence on potential buyers, publishers seem to rely more on impressions than actual marketing research.

A few studies have been conducted on book choice based on covers in the academic world. Younger children are influenced most by cover art when selecting books. (Examples: Kirk, 1985; Rankin, 1944; Smith, 1994; Vacek, 1982) One study done by Margaret Marshall in Great Britain (1982) discovered that teens are less likely to be influenced by cover art than the books' titles, but covers were the second most important factor in selection.

In the publishing world, editors seemingly consult casually with first-level buyers, such as booksellers, librarians and teachers. Little appears to have been done using teenagers themselves as members of focus groups and taste panels. In spite of the high cost of providing first rate cover art, particularly paperback art, text and art editors in the publishing houses rely on the aforementioned conventional wisdom and instinct. They are also influenced by successful cover art used on book covers done by other publishers, but it is overall a very imprecise process.

There is even disagreement over the use of movie tie-in covers. Some publishers believe that a cover related to a recent movie release will automatically increase sales. Those involved in publishing classics, however, have concerns about maintaining a classy image for the book, as well as not dating a cover with an image from a particular movie.

Although much "borrowing" goes on in publishing regarding cover art, publishers do protect their rights on occasion. A recent example was the legal halt of an imitation cover of the wildly popular V.C. Andrews' books.

International Interpretations

There is some interest in using book cover art in more than one country as an obvious way to cut costs in book production. However, at this time, most covers are redesigned in the international market. An examination of a Duncan title provides an illustration. The original hardcover dust jacket (1976) features a dark-haired teenager in a bikini with a witch's face super-imposed over the girl's face. Figure 3 shows the original American paperback cover (1977) of Summer of Fear.

Figure 3
Summer of Fear

The story focuses on Rachel, a 15-year-old teenager in the Southwest. After her aunt and uncle are killed in a car accident in the Ozarks, Rachel's cousin Julia, aged 17, comes to live in the Southwest with Rachel's family. Rachel becomes increasingly suspicious of Julia, and finally discovers that the girl is an imposter and a practioner of black witchcraft. Julia plans to kill Rachel and her family, then marry Rachel's father. In the end, Rachel manages to save her mother. Julia, now exposed, disappears, probably to try her sneaky plots elsewhere.

Duncan's books are popular in many countries. Descriptions of the cover arts in some European countries of Summer of Fear follow.

- England: an unpleasant redheaded girl of about 14 glowers at another teenage brunette girl who scowls back. The background depicts Southwestern mountains.
- France: a black haired woman in a flowing white evening gown sits in a romantic setting holding a candle.
- Germany: a girl about 12 gazes in horror at a tiny Halloween pumpkin in a nest.

It should be noted that the current paperback American cover has been redesigned as a simple horror genre title with the artwork showing the photo of a skull lying in a photographer's developing tray.

As Duncan observed in a letter to me in September, 1995, "All I can say about the jackets of foreign editions is that each book is a new adventure. Many times when I received my author's copy I have no idea which book it is. I can't read the text, and the jacket has no resemblance to anything I've ever written. I go leafing through to see if the name of a character might pop up to give me a clue, but that doesn't work with editions in Oriental languages."

It can only be assumed that the publishers in Europe and elsewhere have a sound idea of what their market groups want, if it is only the conventional wisdom to be found in the U.S. Whether or not they have engaged in more focused research than American publishers can only be conjectured.

Summary

In spite of the apparent importance

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of cover art in selling books to both adults and young adults, American publishers have done little structured analysis to determine what factors are important in making sales. It may be that these unknown factors change too quickly to make such analysis, if not useless, frustrating. It can only be concluded at this point that book cover art is based on instinctual rather than proven factors.

Another aspect contributing to the imprecise process of book cover art is the secretive nature of many teenagers. Adolescence is a hard time for most kids, and they are often unwilling to share their thinking and reactions about a lot of things, including book cover art.

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